

“An Everlasting Name”
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Our Acts passage invites us to become travelers on a journey-- not only on the journey from one physical location to another, but also spiritually from one location to another. So riders, climb aboard your chariots, and let's see where this ancient text might bring us.

Here we discover that Philip has received special directions from an angel. Philip was one of the 7 Deacons who were appointed to care for the poor and the widows in the newly forming church. But the angel's message would send Philip far beyond his expected role in Jerusalem. The current Deacons of our church know that sometimes, the Spirit moves you beyond your expected role and calling, as we have seen this pandemic stretch the ways we need to care for one another.

Philip meets the Ethiopian eunuch along the way. The bible doesn't give him a name, but early church father Iranaeus of Lyons called him "Simeon Bachus." I hope it's okay if we call him Simeon; maybe if we were around today, we would ask Simeon what pronouns he prefers; since the bible describes him as a eunuch, we know that he was sexually different-- either by choice, by birth, or by coercion. The queer community has been happy to claim Simeon as part of their family, and Simeon is likely the first African to receive baptism.

And while it's good to honor difference, people who are different often don't want that to be the first thing noticed about them; that question, "Where are you from?" gets old and can even be considered a microaggression when the question's implicit meaning is, "You don't belong here, do you?" But what Philip notices about Simeon isn't his queerness or his foreigner status; it is what he is *reading*.

Scripture describes the Ethiopian eunuch reading from Isaiah as he bumps along in his chariot. Was someone else driving while he read? Still, I imagine something as precious as a scroll-- at those times, they were painstakingly handwritten on parchment or leather, would likely be too precious to read on the go. Suppose that instead of reading a scroll, he was chanting in his head over and over again the words that stood out most to him from his worship in Jerusalem. - Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,

and like a lamb silent before its shearer,

so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him.

These words from the prophet were like an earworm to Simeon; I imagine him chanting them repeatedly as he coursed over the wilderness terrain. You'll find those words in scripture just a couple of chapters beyond another text which might have been of interest to Simeon: Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, "The Lord will surely separate me from his people"; and do not let the eunuch say, "I am just a dry tree."

For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.”

Maybe Simeon was thirsty for such promises.

When you are in the wilderness, with its lonely and desolate landscape, an encounter with a stranger becomes a big event. Kai had her first violin lesson in person with her newly vaccinated teacher yesterday. It was her first time walking as a guest into someone’s home, who wasn’t family, in more than a year. As her mom, I felt like it was a momentous occasion as I have watched my daughter thirst for connection as she navigated the wilderness of virtual relationships and virtual learning. Walking through the physical threshold of someone else’s home again as guests was such an ordinary and extraordinary occasion. While Kai played it cool-- there were no hugs, not yet, and everyone still wore masks-- I noticed she was looking for the little things that reminded her of old rituals that were sacred to her: sliding her feet into a borrowed pair of slippers, and playing with her teacher’s little wooden figurines and toys that had delighted her when she began violin as a kindergartener.

So when Philip came along, Simeon accepted the occasion for interaction in the wilderness as the sacred and strange event it was; he invited Philip into his chariot to sit with him, and Philip began teaching the meanings of the prophets-- a story that included people like the foreigner and the eunuch, a story that would lead to the good news of Jesus Christ.

Just as rare as an encounter with a stranger in the desert may be, an appearance of water presents an even rarer occasion. So when they get to some water, Simeon asks, “Look, there is water. What prevents me from being baptized?” Philip does not respond right away, and in Philip’s silence, we can hear: Your being a foreigner does not prevent you from being baptized. Your being a sexual or gender minority does not prevent you from being baptized. In that bit of silence, I like to think that Philip is getting an education of his own as he silently dismisses each reason he traditionally might have thought God’s promises would belong to someone else but not be available to someone like Simeon.

In that moment, there was nothing to do *but* baptize Simeon.

In the wilderness geography, we move with Philip not just from Jerusalem to Gaza-- which is about 50 miles-- but also with the Ethiopian, from Judea, to Africa. In addition to this physical geography, we move in the wilderness from staying within the familiar as spaces of welcome, to looking far beyond the familiar, as spaces where the Holy Spirit moves and acts.

When I traveled on an Israel-Palestine trip many years ago, I traveled through the Negev Desert, in the southern region of Israel. It is what one would expect a desert to look like: dry and sandy, with rifts formed by wadis that had not run with water for hundreds, even thousands of years. I have been to the Sinai Desert too, in northern Egypt-- stunning in its topography,

which includes what we think could be Mount Sinai, where Moses encountered God. Parts of the Sinai Desert look like God dipped an enormous hand in wet, ocean sand, then let the soupy sand fall between God's fingers, forming dribble mountains like I used to make as a child at the beach. And, I have been on the road between Jerusalem and Gaza, the road today's scripture calls a *wilderness* road, a desert. Jerusalem is the highest point of that journey, situated in the hills of Judea, and the road steadily drops downhill as it gently slopes down the rolling hills to the seaside plains of Gaza. Except for Gaza, which today suffers under harsh economic restrictions and confinement of its large population within tight borders, much of the rest of the way is farmland: orchards, olive groves, and vineyards. What it is *not* is a desert.

I wonder, then, why the scripture is so keen to point out that this passageway is a wilderness road, when it probably wasn't wilderness at all.

Maybe scripture wants to place Simeon in the same place spiritually where some of the most important things happened to God's people. In the wilderness, the Hebrews learned for 40 years how to live as a free people once they had escaped slavery in Egypt. It was in the wilderness that they made their covenant with God and received the law. It was in the wilderness of Judea that John came preaching about repentance and offering baptism. It was in the wilderness that Jesus spent 40 days, confronting his temptations and preparing to live into his ministry. The Ethiopian eunuch becomes the spiritual heir to these traditions, even though they did not belong to his foremothers or forefathers. In the wilderness, God gives him an everlasting name. In the wilderness, the *eunuch* becomes the one who bears fruit.

Jesus tells us that he is the vine, we are the branches, and God is the vinegrower. The way we bear fruit is by abiding in his love. It is not by living up to a production quota. It is by abiding in his love. It is not by being genetically engineered to reproduce. We bear fruit by abiding in God's love. Abiding. That means sticking around long enough for a fresh green shoot from the vine that is Jesus to wrap its tendrils around you, again and again, to hold you close in God's love.

We share the Sacrament of Communion today. It is a foretaste of what we can become when we abide in God's love: full and robust, fruitful and exquisite. Even through the wilderness-- or maybe, especially through the wilderness, we who might feel like ordinary and dry branches can be transformed, by God's love and grace, to live fruitful lives. No one is exempt from the possibility of God's love-- in fact, it is more than possible; it is inescapable.